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WASHINGTON, Aug. 13, 2004—The United States won't send back to China 22 Chinese-origin ethnic Uyghur detainees now held at a U.S. military prison in Cuba, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell told Radio Free Asia (RFA). But he added that Washington is still trying to find a third country to take them in.

"The Uyghurs are a difficult problem, and we are trying to resolve all issues with respect to all detainees at Guantanamo," Powell said in an interview here Aug. 12. "The Uyghurs are not going back to China, but finding places for them is not a simple matter. We are trying to find places for them, and, of course, all candidate countries are being looked at."

Some 22 ethnic Uyghurs have been held since 2002 at the Guantanamo Bay prison. Amnesty International alleged in May that a Chinese delegation had taken part in mistreatment of some of them. U.S. military officials have denied allegations of physical mistreatment leveled by some released detainees from Britain, but say some "credible" allegations "are being investigated."

Human rights groups fear the Uyghurs—the Muslim people who constitute a small minority in China but a majority in China's remote Xinjiang Autonomous Region—could face harassment, detention, or torture if they are returned to China. All were detained as part of a broad anti-terror sweep in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States.

Powell also said the United States would help bear the cost of dismantling North Korea's plutonium and highly enriched uranium program, but only if Pyongyang agrees to a "totally irreversible" dismantling of its declared nuclear arms program.

"I think just as we did with Libya in helping to remove the burden that it had of these programs, we would certainly help North Korea," Powell said. "It's important to say, though, it has to be done in the context of something that is totally irreversible, and it has to be done in the context of the entire program, all aspects of the program, and it has to be an acknowledgement of not only the previous programs of plutonium, but the enriched uranium programs as well."

"So, in that context, and that's the six-party talks, certainly the United States would be willing to assist with the cost of removal, destruction, and total elimination of the programs," he said.

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